

Covid-19 All staff briefing 27 July 2020: Questions and Answers

Transitioning from lockdown

Return to campus

- **I totally understand that student facing staff will be your first priority to integrate back on to campus, but do you have any idea when the back office, non-customer facing staff may be require back to the office?**

The focus of the university has been to make the campus operational for students and staff by September and that is why we have developed our 11-step plan to open our buildings safely and in line with social distancing guidelines. It doesn't mean we are preparing for the return of all staff at once, and in fact it simply won't be possible in most cases. Decisions around individual staff members need to be made through discussion with line managers and on a department by department basis and HR will shortly be providing departments with advice and guidelines to help them make these decisions effectively.

Social distancing

- **How will social distancing be enforced? The Library was busy last week and most people didn't social distance. If it was not being enforced before the Library was open how will it be enforced now that it is open?**
- **I have been on campus and this was back in April. I saw other staff members who were not maintaining any social distancing and this included managers. If managers are not taking this seriously, how can people feel comfortable approaching them when they have concerns?**

It's really important that staff and students take personal responsibility for their actions and adhere to the practices and behaviours we are putting in place on campus, and as well as doing all we can to make suitable changes to our environment we will also need to help the community understand what's required of it. So very clear signage will be visible on campus and security staff will be on hand to monitor people and remind them of the rules where needed. As more people return to campus we would anticipate that the community will support this in a fair and inclusive way.

Face coverings

- **Thank you for organising this webinar and it is informative. Regarding face coverings, will the university provide face masks, gloves or face visors? If so, where will we be able to obtain these from and is there a start date to collect them?**

Those members of staff who require PPE as part of their job will be provided with them, and those staff who have continued to be needed on campus over the summer have already been given the appropriate equipment, for example. We are not currently supplying face coverings to staff and students more widely, but are ensuring mitigating measures are in place across campus in line with current government guidelines.

- **If staff choose to wear face masks in the office will managers expect staff not to wear these for meetings etc?**

For the time being, we are following government guidance and students and staff are welcome to wear face coverings anywhere on campus without prejudice, but we will not enforce their use. That is one of the reasons we will be continuing the 2 metre social distancing policy and using Perspex screens and other measures to mitigate. As we have tried to show, office and teaching spaces will look very different to how we remember them – furniture has been removed and spaces made safer, and we will also be mitigating by focusing on movement around buildings, staggered times on campus, etc.

Decisions around meetings will need to be made on a department by department basis. Where meeting spaces are not suitable, alternative arrangements may need to be made.

Reopening of the Library

- **I have been told by a student that the Library is open for UG students only to do revision, however it is not open to Masters students who have their 1st sitting exams in August. Is this correct, and if so, can the MSc students use the library as well?**
- **The Library is open today, who will be policing this? The staff that have been asked to come back - are they being supported? Are the management back or is it the staff on the floor?**

The Library has partially reopened with social distancing in place until 28 August specifically to support any students revising for exams in August; and the relevant students have been notified. Library staff are working to support on a rota basis and are supervised by a senior manager.

- **Will alcohol be sold on campus? Physical distancing and alcohol is not a winning combo.**

Yes, alcohol will still be available on campus, and it wouldn't be practical or appropriate to stop students bringing drinks on to campus regardless of whether it is sold there. However, the security team will be monitoring closely as usual.

- **Regarding getting permission to come onto campus, various procedures obviously have to be followed before staff are granted access to buildings while the campus is still closed. What is the time frame from applying to being granted access? A few have said it seems to take too long.**

It's vital for the safety of everyone that access to buildings is measured and monitored very carefully and that both individuals and the buildings themselves are appropriately risk assessed before permissions are granted. Access is currently prioritised by heads of department and so there may be some delay while measures are put in place. Once requests are made to the Health and Safety team there is a three-day turnaround.

- **At 2m social distancing the government guideline on a safe indoors time limit to be in physical contact with others in order to minimise the risk of infection is 15 minutes. How could that 15 minute indoors limit at 2m social distancing be applied during meetings and lab sessions given that our minimum contact time is 1 hour?**

The government advice is:

Where you cannot stay 2 metres apart (or 1 metre with risk mitigation where 2 metres is not viable) you should:

- only work together up to 15 minutes at a time
- use screens and barriers to separate people where possible
- work side by side or back-to-back rather than face-to-face
- have fixed teams to minimise exposure

Brunel is adopting a 2m distance rule across campus, and we are also introducing new office layouts and screening (where necessary) to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus. We won't ever be relying solely on one method to keep staff and students as safe as possible, and other mitigating factors such as increased cleaning, availability of disinfectant wipes, appropriate ventilation, etc will all play their part in that. We should also recognise that there will simply be fewer people on campus at any one time and that spaces are being restructured and reorganised to take account of social distancing, offering further protection.

- **Will teaching rooms/labs need be cleaned in between each of the sessions?**

Thorough cleaning of teaching rooms and labs will take place daily and key touch points will be visited and disinfected throughout the day. Disinfectant wipes will be available in all communal and teaching spaces so that students and staff can disinfect their own space as required, and materials will be replenished as needed.

- **I think it is becoming more and more clear that this winter will be tricky, with the likelihood of a resurgence in cases. Is this risk factored in to a mass return to campus in September with the peak winter months following shortly after?**

We are working hard to make the campus operational by September for the return of students who are able to attend, however that doesn't mean we are preparing for the return of all staff and students at once, and due to social distancing guidelines in force across campus this wouldn't be possible anyway. The measure we have taken on campus are intended to prevent the spread of Covid-19 regardless of the time of year. However, we are also planning for all eventualities, which could include further restrictions on campus or even closure if necessary and we will be ready to respond if that's the case.

- **What plans for outdoor student sport?**

Following recent government announcements concerning sports and leisure activities, we are working towards reopening buildings from September in line with our 11-step plan. The tennis courts and athletics track have already opened with guidelines in place, and we're looking to reintroduce further outdoor sports in the next couple of weeks.

- **When is the gym on campus opening? How will we manage members of the public coming onto campus for this?**

We are looking to reopen the gym safely and with social distancing guidelines in play next month, but initially just for those students who live on campus. When we do open up to members of the public we will expect them to adhere to the same guidelines and practices as the Brunel community, and will ensure appropriate signage is in place across all of our buildings. We are also still offering online classes through the Brunel Sport app.

- **I'm concerned about air-con systems used in various buildings on campus and Covid-19. Can these systems still be used? Do they have to be turned off? Do they require special cleaning before being turned on?**

Questions around ventilation of specific buildings will need to be brought out as we work through our 11-step plan and in our work with Building Custodians particularly. The role of

the custodians is to consider how the spaces can be managed effectively and to work closely with the Health and Safety team, and Estates, accounting for how staff may be impacted. What we won't be doing is asking anyone to work in a situation where their safety is compromised.

- **When will Risk Assessments be shared with staff?**

Current Risk Assessments are on the Health and Safety site on IntraBrunel, and these will be updated further before September.

- **What are custodians? Are they new members of staff or existing? What would their role be?**

The building custodians have a key role to play in the opening of buildings, which includes working closely with the Health and Safety and Estates teams to assess space, check signage, ensure materials such as wipes are in situ, and generally make sure buildings are Covid secure. The role is normally incorporated into the College Service Managers role, however there are some buildings where there is no one formally appointed and so these have been created with input from Heads of Departments. Custodians are currently in the process of being trained.

- **Is a pilot being planned to test how people coming back to campus will work?**

The campus has continued to operate in different areas throughout the pandemic, and we have worked closely to ensure the safety of those staff attending campus throughout. Our plans are informed by the processes we already have put into practice, and we have also worked with the TPO and Student Services staff and they have also been helping test arrangements, assessing office space for the impact of 2m social distancing. This work has helped to create templates that are now being consulted upon with the staff involved. The template will be shared with departments once finalised.

Line management

- **When will line managers be having the conversation about if/how/who will be expected to work in September? I'm concerned that this conversation hasn't started yet and I want to have time to prepare to go back to campus if that is required.**

Line managers should already be keeping in close touch with their staff during remote working and should have a good idea of where issues might arise and what options they have. HR are currently finalising a checklist and needs framework, and information to support line managers and this will be made available shortly to support the process.

- **If line managers are expected to play a key role on who works from home can you please then run a webinar for these people rather than asking them to read dense guidelines please.**

Yes, that's a good idea. We will look to do that.

- **Our line managers/managers have presented our work as being essential on campus, where it is not (Clearing, which can be done from home). Will there be a policy that does not force all staff to be on campus?**

From 13 August, Clearing will take place both remotely and on campus and we are also trying our best to accommodate staff who would like to work from their own office on campus during this period. However, the VPN isn't stable enough for us to all work from home on results day and the days that follow, so we have created safe work spaces on campus for those who are helping. Such is the importance of Clearing to the future of the University we want to do everything we can to ensure the call centre works successfully, while ensuring everyone's safety.

Question to be taken forward to the relevant Task & Finish Group:

- **As there is Brunel Pharmacy on campus, could you arrange with them to set aside a number of flu jabs (private) for all members of staff that would like to have it done (and pay for it ourselves)? I do not qualify for it on the NHS, but would like it this year to protect not just for myself, but for my family and all those that I work alongside. Based on the Covid situation, it may be difficult to source a flu jab this year.**

Supporting staff

Annual leave

- **The annual leave information being given is not absolutely clear - you are saying 10 days can carry over - our manager has advised that this does not apply to our department unless we have evidence that we have been directly affected by Covid. Please clarify further.**

- **We have been told by our managers via the Line Manager that we will only be able to roll 5 days over; however you mentioned 10 days. Can you confirm which is correct?**

The national policy of allowing staff to carry over 10 days of annual leave instead of five was brought in for staff who were unable to take leave because of Covid-19 and it's something we have adopted as a university. Some managers may have interpreted this as meaning that only staff who had to keep working during lockdown could carry the full 10 days, but that isn't correct. Brunel's position is that all staff can carry 10 days annual leave from last year to the current year.

- **Many of us rely on public transport to get to and from campus, so no matter how safe the campus is, we'll be putting ourselves at extra risk twice a day (and often unavoidably at peak times). I am aware masks are mandatory on public transport, but this isn't being followed 100%, which puts us at even greater risk. Will Brunel be taking this into account when deciding who can work from home and when?**

It is currently the law that people using public transport must wear an adequate face covering to reduce the spread of the virus, so we would encourage all staff to familiarise themselves with this information. When staff do arrive at campus we would advise that they immediately wash their hands or use the hand sanitisers at the entrances to all of our buildings, which would be sufficient to prevent transmission. It's important that staff who are concerned or anxious about using public transport raise this with their line manager and discuss potential options around starting and finishing times, for example.

- **I am concerned about public transport as I use it to get to work - three buses, sometimes four to get to work and back home. The buses get really crowded at peak times so there is no social distancing. I asked the question last week about the Brunel bus service, which was featured on the intranet in January 2020, if this goes ahead can it be extended to the Hayes end of the Uxbridge Road?**

The new bus scheme has been put on hold for the time being while our focus has been on our immediate response to Covid-19, but we will be able to return to it shortly.

BAME community

- **Why is the University not putting in place extra precautions for BAME staff and students? There are no extra risk assessments in place nor any extra precautions being taken.**
- **Apologies, if this question might have been asked previously but what direct measures Brunel have or will be taken at Brunel in regards to front line BAME staff?**

We do recognise and understand the concerns that Brunel's BAME community has and it's something that we've been talking about specifically at the Task and Finish Group concerned with support for our staff. Although these discussions are ongoing, we are treating BAME members of staff as we would other vulnerable groups and that means prioritising them when talking about things like working from home or other measures to protect staff. The Health and Safety team are also in ongoing conversations with the BAME network and working to understand concerns directly, and building into their risk assessment process.

- **I have seen measures being taken to protect BAME from COVID but what about obese staff? There is a medical report to say they are also at a much higher risk - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-53532228>**

We are currently looking at measures we can all take to ensure vulnerable members of staff are as safe as possible, and this would include staff with pre-existing conditions or who have special requirements, for example. To support this, HR is currently developing guidance to help managers and to encourage discussions with staff prior to returning to campus and we will be able to share that as soon as it is finalised.

- **Currently schools will return full time in September, however should this change, will Brunel support their members of staff affected by this? And how?**

This is an area which will need to be teased out through conversations between individual members of staff and their line managers. We will do our best to accommodate both the needs of the individual balancing this with the needs of the University. We are currently in consultation with Unions regarding a working from home policy and producing guidance to support managers and staff. The EDI team are working on creating a working parents networking group which will also provide support.

- **Since working from home I compared my energy bills to the same period last year and they are around 50% higher this year. Will the university compensate us for this?**

The University is not compensating for energy bills, but we do provide financial guidance which can be found under [here](#). You can also claim through HMRC by completing a P87 form. Details can be found on the HMRC website <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-income-tax-relief-for-your-employment-expenses-p87>

Delivering education and student support

- **What has the student reaction been to teaching being delivered online? Have many asked for fee reductions?**

We have done our best to keep students up to date with our plans for dual delivery, though there are still details to be shared at a departmental level and we might expect further questions after this information is made available. Up to now we have had a couple of questions in this area, but have pointed out that the delivery of teaching this year will mean more work and greater costs to the university, not less. This is something that is supported by the OfS.

- **How does Mr Murphy propose to maintain a 2m social distance in one to one appointments with students, in limited space? Should appointments remain online?**

Arrangements around meetings and use of meeting spaces will need to be made on a departmental basis and informed by the work that is currently being done on campus, however the current social distancing guidelines of two metres will still apply and where this isn't possible meetings should be held online.

- **The dual delivery approach as it is currently being delivered involves a minimum amount of on-campus seminars for each module (and in many departments/divisions pretty much mandates this). How will this requirement be reconciled with statements that there will be individual discussions with staff members before they are asked to return to campus?**

Our dual delivery approach includes having some on-campus activity each week for all programmes, but that isn't something that is required for each module, which would be dependant on the circumstances of individual lecturers. So for certain modules there may be few or no on-campus activities, but this would be made up by other modules across the programme. The specifics around programme delivery is something that is currently being finalised by subjects and we will be sharing that with students as soon as it is available, in line with OfS requirements.

Ensuring financial sustainability

- **What about the normal spinal point increments that usually happen in October? Will they go ahead?**

The cost of living rise is negotiated nationally and we will await the outcome of that. Measures specific to Brunel will be considered once we have a better understanding of how successful our recruitment activity has been.

- **Will the recruitment freeze lead to a dog fight between colleges and central departments if needing to recruit professional staff to their teams?**

A sensible, joined-up approach will be needed here. We've developed an extensive form that Heads of Department need to complete when requesting to recruit to a position and if a role is absolutely critical and it can't be filled any other way then it is approved.

- **The government furlough scheme is changing from August. Will the University continue to support line managers with staff on furlough through Aug/Sept and ensure staff remain on 100% pay?**

The Government's furlough scheme ends in October and there are now very few members of Brunel staff being furloughed. These members of staff will remain on 100% pay for the duration of the period.

Other

- **Andrew mentioned the NHS track&trace app, but to my knowledge, this app is currently not available yet, and likely won't be till winter at the earliest. Will this impact your measures for preventing a potential super-spreading event at campus?**

The NHS track & trace service is in operation. More information can be found here - <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/nhs-test-and-trace-how-it-works>

- **Can we be given X amount of months free parking once we are back at campus, to make up for the months we've been paying for during lockdown?**

On the basis that working from home has been temporary we have continued with parking and we know that, though this might seem a small amount to many while we are talking about the huge financial pressures the university is currently facing, it may well be important to other members of staff who are also struggling financially at this time. We would ask that those staff talk to their line manager or their HR business partner if they are struggling. Staff who want to cancel their permits can do so online through reception, but must remember to reapply when they return.

- **Will car parking sharing be possible? Avoiding public transport will increase demand on car parking; and if we are rotating coming to campus, we can also share the parking spots?**

Although car sharing is a good idea and one that we can look into supporting as a university, the demand for parking on campus isn't likely to be greater than we can accommodate on the basis that we won't all be returning to campus at the same time or working at the same time.

- **When we are all overworked and stressed why are PDRs still going ahead?**

We are designing a more streamlined PDR process this year in light of the impact of Covid-19 on our time and workloads. This will ensure that staff are able to have supportive conversations with their line manager and recognition of their good work before and during this period. We've let staff know [here](#), and more information will be available shortly.